THE COW PUNCHER

By ROBERT J. C. STEAD

Author of "Kitchener, and Other Poems"

Illustrations by IRWIN MYERS

CHAPTER XI.

Conward paused as he entered the room. He had evidently not expected to find Elden there, but after a moment of hesitation he nodded cordially to his partner.

"Almost ready, Miss Wardin?" he asked, cheerily. "Our train goes in—" He took his watch from his pocket and consulted it.

Dave's eyes were fixed on the girl. He wondered whether, in this testing moment, she would fight for herself or lean weakly on him as her protector. Her answer reassured him.

"It makes no difference when it goes, Mr. Conward. I'm not going on it." Her voice trembled nervously, but there was no weakness in it. The money which Dave had given her was still crumpled in her hand. She advanced to where Conward stood vaguely trying to sense the situation, and held the bills before him. "Here is your money, Mr. Conward," she said.

"Why, what does this mean?"

"Here is your money. Will you take it, please?"

"No, I won't take it until you explain—"

She opened her fingers and the bills fell to the floor. "All right," she said.

Conward's eyes had shifted to Dave. "You are at the bottom of this, Elden," he said. "What does it mean?"

"It means, Conward," Dave answered, and there was steel in his voice—"it means that after all these years I have discovered what a cur you are—just in time to balk you, at least in this instance."

Conward flushed, but he maintained an attitude of composure. "You've been drinking, Dave," he said. "I meant no harm to Miss Wardin."

"Don't make me call you a liar as well as a cur."

The word cut through Conward's mask of composure. "Now by God! I won't take that from any man!" he shouted, and with a swing of his arms threw his coat over his shoulders.

Dave made no motion, and Conward slowly brought his coat back to position.

"I was right," said Dave, calmly. "I knew you wouldn't fight. You think more of your skin than you do of your honor. Well—it's better worth protection."

"If this girl were not here—" Conward protested. "I will not fight—"

"Oh, I will leave," said Miss Wardin, with alacrity. "And I hope he soaks you well," she shot back, as the door closed behind her.

But by this time Conward had assumed a superior attitude. "Dave," he said, "I won't fight over a quarrel of this kind. But remember, there are some things in which no man allows another to interfere. Least of all such a man as you. There are ways of getting back, and I'll get back."

"Why such a man as me? I know I haven't been much of a moralist in business matters—I've been in the wrong company for that—but I draw the line—"

"Oh, you're fine stuff, all right. What would your friend Miss Hardy think if I told her all I know?"

"You know nothing that could affect Miss Hardy's opinion."

"It's too bad your memory is so poor," Conward sneered. "Why were your lights off that night I passed your car? Oh, I guess you remember! What will Miss Hardy think of that?"

For a moment Dave was unable to follow Conward's thought. Then his mind reached back to that night he drove into the country with Bert Morrison, when on the brow of a hill he switched off his lights that they might better admire the majesty of the heavens. That Conward should place an evil interpretation upon that incident was a thing so monstrous, so altogether beyond argument, that Dave fell back upon the basic human method reserved for such occasions. His fist leaped forward, and Conward crumpled up before it.

Conward lay stunned for a few minutes, then, with returning consciousness, he tried to sit up. Dave helped him to a chair. Blood flowed down his face, and as he began to realize what had occurred it was joined with tears of pain, rage, humiliation.

"You got that one on me, Elden," he said, after a while. "But it was a coward's blow. You hit me when I wasn't looking. Very well. Two can play at that game. I'll hit when you're not looking . . . where you don't expect it . . . where you can't hit back. I know the stake you're playing for, and—I'm going to spoil it." He turned his swollen, bloody face to Dave's, and hatred stood up in his eyes as he uttered the threat. "I'll hit you, Dave," he repeated. "where you can't hit back."

"Thanks for the warning," said Elden. "So Irene Hardy is to be the stake. All right, I'll sit in. And I'll see."

"You'll think you've won," returned Conward, leeringly, "and then you'll find out that you didn't. I'll present it to you, Dave, like that." He lifted a burnt match from an ash-tray and held it before him.

Dave's impulse was to seize the soft, flabby throat in his hands and make it lifeless. With a resolute effort he turned to the telephone and lifted the receiver.

"Send a car and a doctor to Conward Elden's office," he said when he had got the desired number. "Mr. Conward has been hurt—fell against a desk, or something. Nothing serious, but may need a stitch or two." Then, turning to Conward: "It will depend on you whether this affair gets to the public—on you and Miss Wardin. Make your own explanations. And as soon as you are able to be about our partnership will be dissolved."

Conward was ready enough to adopt Dave's suggestion that their quarrel should not come to the notice of the public, and Gladys Wardin, apparently, kept her own counsel in the matter. In a time when firms were going out of business without even the formality of an assignment, and others were being absorbed by their competitors, the dissolution of the Conward & Elden establishment occasioned no more than passing notice. The explanation, "for business reasons," given to the newspapers, seemed sufficient.

Irene Hardy found herself in a position of increasing delicacy. Since the day of their conversation in the tea-room Dave had been constant in his attentions, but, true to his ultimatum, had uttered no word that could in any way be construed to be more or less than platonic. She had now no doubt that she felt for Dave that attachment without which ceremonies are without avail and with which ceremonies are but ceremonies. And yet she shrank from surrender. . . . And she knew that some day she must surrender.

The situation was complicated by conditions which involved her mother and Conward. It was apparent that Conward's friendship for Mrs. Hardy did not react to Dave's advantage. Conward was careful to drop no word in Irene's hearing that could be taken as a direct reflection upon Dave, but she was conscious of an influence, a magnetism, it almost seemed, the whole tendency of which was to pull her away from Elden.

Mrs. Hardy had invested practically all her little fortune in her house. The small sum which had been saved from that unfortunate investment had been eaten up in the cost of furnishing and maintaining the home. Doctor Hardy, in addition to his good name, had left his daughter some few thousand dollars of life insurance, and this was the capital which was now supplying their daily needs. It, too, would soon be exhausted, and Irene was confronted with the serious business of finding a means of livelihood for herself and her mother.

She discussed her problem with Bert Morrison, with whom she had formed a considerable friendship. She wondered whether she might be able to get a position on one of the newspapers.

"Don't think of it," said Bert. "If you want to keep a sane, sweet outlook on humanity, don't examine it too closely. That's what we have to do in the newspaper game, and that's why we're all cynics. Keep out of it."

"But I must earn a living," Irene protested.

"Ever contemplate marriage?" said

"Ever Contemplate Marriage?" Said Miss Morrison, With Disconcerting Frankness.

Miss Morrison, with disconcerting frankness.

The color rose in Irene's cheeks, but she knew that her friend was discussing a serious matter seriously. "Why, yes," she admitted, "I have contemplated it; in fact, I am contemplating it. That's one of the reasons I want to start earning my living. When I marry I want to marry as a matter of choice—not because it's the only way out."

"Now you're talking," said Bert. "And most of us girls who marry as a matter of choice—don't marry. I've only known one man from whom a proposal would set me thinking. And he'll never propose to me—not now. Not since Miss Hardy came West."

"Oh," said Irene, slowly, "I'm—I'm so sorry!"

"It's all right," said Bert, looking out of the window. "Just another of life's little bumps. We get used to them—in time. But you want a job. Let me see; you draw, don't you?"

"Just for a pastime. I can't earn a living that way."

"I'm not so sure. Perhaps not with art in the abstract. You must commercialize it. If you, on the one hand, can make a picture of the Rockies, which you can't sell, and, on the other, can make a picture of a pair of shoes, which you can sell, which, as a woman of good sense, in need of the simoleons, are you going to do? You're going to draw the shoes—and the pay-check. Now I think I can get you started that way, on catalogue work and ad cuts. Try your pencil on something—anything at all—and bring down a few samples."

So Irene's little studio-room began to take on a practical purpose. It was work which called for form and proportion rather than color, and in these Irene excelled. She soon found herself with as much as she could do, in addition to the duties of the household, as maids were luxuries which could no longer be afforded and her mother seemed unable to realize that they were not still living in the affluence of Doctor Hardy's income. To Irene, therefore, fell the work of the house, as well as its support.

But her success in earning a living did not seem in the slightest degree to clear the way for marriage. She could not ask Dave to assume the support of her mother; particularly in view of Mrs. Hardy's behavior toward him, she could not ask that. She sometimes wondered if Conward—for a long while she refused to complete the thought, but at length, why not? Why shouldn't Conward marry her mother? And what other purpose could he have in his continuous visits to their home? Mrs. Hardy, although no longer young, had by no means surrendered all the attractions of her sex, and Conward was slipping by the period where a young girl would be his natural mate. If they should marry— Irene was no plotter, but it did seem that such a match would clear the way for all concerned. She was surprised, when she turned it over in her mind, to realize that Conward had won for himself such a place in her regard that she could contemplate such a consummation as very much to be desired. Subconsciously, rather than from specific motive, she assumed a still more friendly attitude toward him.

Bert Morrison's confession had, however, set up another very insistent train of thought in Irene's mind. She realized that Bert, with all her show of cynicism and masculinity, was really a very womanly young woman, with just the training and the insight into life that would make her almost irresistible should she enter the matrimonial market. And Bert and Dave were already good friends; very good friends indeed, as Irene suspected from fragments of conversation which either of them dropped from time to time. Although she never doubted the singleness of Dave's devotion, she sometimes suspected that in Bert Morrison's presence he felt a more frank comradeship than in hers. And it was preposterous that he should not know that Bert might be won for the winning. And meantime . . .

Another winter wore away; another spring came rushing from the mountain passes; another summer was upon them, and still Irene Hardy had not surrendered. A thousand times she told herself it was impossible, with her mother to think of—and always she ended in indignation over her treatment of Dave. It was outrageous to keep him waiting . . . and somewhere back of her self-indignation flitted the form—the now seductive form—of Bert Morrison.

Irene Hardy chose to be frank with herself over the situation. She had not doubted the sincerity of her attachment for Dave Elden; but, had she experienced such a doubt, the entry of Bert Morrison into the drama would have forever removed it. In fairness she admitted that things could not continue as they were. If she continued to trifle with Dave Elden—

Yes, trifle. She would be frank. She would not spare herself. She had been trifling with him. . . . She would lay her false pride aside. In the purity of her womanhood, which he could not misunderstand, she would divest herself of all convention and tell him frankly that—that—

She was not sure what she would tell or how she would tell it. She was sure only that she would make him know. At the very next opportunity. . . .

It came on a fine summer's evening in late July, while Dave and Irene drifted in his car over the rich ripening prairies.

Everywhere were fields of dark-green wheat, already beginning to glimmer with the gold of harvest; everywhere were herds of sleek cattle sighing and blowing contentedly in the cool evening air. Away to the west lay the mountains, blue and soft as a pillow of velvet for the head of the dying day; overhead, inverted islands of brass and copper floated lazily in an inverted sea of azure and opal; up from the southwest came the breath of the far Pacific, mild and soft and gentle.

"We started at the wrong end in our nation building," Dave was saying. "We started to build cities, leaving the country to take care of itself. We are finding out how wrong we were. Depend upon it, where there is a prosperous country the cities will take care of themselves. We have been putting the cart before the horse—"

But Irene's eyes were on the sunset; on the slowly fading colors of the cloudlands overhead. Something of that color played across her fine face, mellowing, softening, drawing as it seemed, the very soul to cheeks and lips and eyes. Dave paused in his speech to regard her, and her beauty rushed upon him, engulfed him, overwhelmed him in such a poignancy of tenderness that it seemed for a moment all his resolves must be swept away and he must storm the citadel that would not surrender to siege. . . . Only action could hold him resolute; he pressed down the accelerator until the steel lungs of his motor were drinking power to their utmost capacity and the car roared furiously down the stretches of the country road.

It was dusk when he had burnt out his violence, and, chastened and spent, he turned the machine to hum back gently to the forgotten city. Irene, by some fine telepathy, had followed vaguely the course of his emotions; had followed them in delicious excitement and fear and hope. She sensed in some subtle feminine way the impulse that had sent him roaring into the distances; she watched his powerful hand on the wheel; his clear, steady eye; the minute accuracy with which he controlled his flying motor; and she prayed—and did not know what or why she prayed. But a color not all of the dying sunlight lit her cheek as she guessed—she feared—she hoped—that she had prayed that he might forget his fine resolves—that his heart might at last outrule his head. . . .

In the deepening darkness her fingers found his arm. The motion of the car masked the violence of her trembling, but for a time the pounding of her heart would not allow her speech.

"Dave," she said, at length, "I want to tell you that I think you—that we—that I—Oh, I've been very selfish and proud—" Her fingers had followed his arm to the shoulder, and the car had idled to a standstill. "I have fought as long as I can, Dave. I—I always wanted to—to lose, you know; and now—I surrender."

Elden lost no time in facing the unpleasant task of an interview with Mrs. Hardy. It was even less pleasant than he expected.

"Irene is of age," said Mrs. Hardy, bluntly. "If she will, she will. But I must tell you plainly that I will do all I can to dissuade her. Ungrateful child!" she exclaimed, in an outburst of temper, "after all these years to throw herself away in an infatuation for a cow puncher when there are men like Mr. Conward—"

"Conward!" interrupted Dave.

"He has the manners of a gentleman," she said, in a tone intended to be crushing.

"And the morals of a coyote," Dave returned hotly.

"O-o-o-h!" said Mrs. Hardy, in a low, shocked cry. That Elden should speak of Conward with such disdain seemed to her little less than sacrilege. Then, gathering herself together with some dignity: "If you cannot speak respectfully of Mr. Conward you will please leave the house. I shall not forbid you to see Irene; I know that would be useless. But please do not trouble me with your presence."

When Dave had gone Mrs. Hardy rang up Conward's number.

"Oh, Mr. Conward!" she said. "You know who is speaking? . . . Yes. You must come up tonight. I do want to talk with you. I—I've been insulted—in my own house. By that—that Elden. It's all very terrible. I can't tell you over the telephone."

Conward called early in the evening. Mrs. Hardy had heard the bell and bustled into the room. She had not yet recovered from her agitation, and made no effort to conceal it.

"Come into my sitting room, Mr. Conward. I am so glad you have come. Really, I am so upset. It is such a comfort to have some one you can depend on—some one whose advice one can seek, on occasions like this. I never thought—"

"There, there," he said. "You must control yourself. Tell me. It will relieve you, and perhaps I can help."

"Oh, I'm sure you can," she returned. "It's all over Irene and that—that—I will say it—that cow puncher. To think it should have come to this! Mr. Conward, you are not a mother, so you can't understand. Ungrateful girl! But I blame him. And the doctor. I never wanted him to come West. It was that fool trip, in that fool motor—"

Conward smiled to himself over her unaccustomed violence. Mrs. Hardy must be deeply moved when she forgot to be correct. He had readily surmised the occasion of her distress. It needed no words from Mrs. Hardy to tell him that Irene and Dave were engaged. He had expected it for some time, and the information was not altogether distasteful to him. He had come somewhat under the spell of Irene's attractiveness, but he had no deep attachment for her. He was not aware that he had ever had an abiding attachment for any woman. Attachments were things which he put on and off as readily as a change of clothes. He planned to hit Dave through Irene, but he planned that when he struck it should be a death blow. Their engagement would lend a sharper edge to his shaft.

It may as well be set down that for Mrs. Hardy Conward had no regard whatever. Even while he shaped soft words for her ear he held her in contempt. To him she was merely a silly old woman.

(TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK)

Good Taste.

Good taste is the conscience of the mind. Lowell's definition is compact of thought and is worth dwelling upon Good taste is a trait we all agree in valuing, though its meaning as a rule is rather vaguely felt; we urge its cultivation and admire its exercise but the quality itself is generally less analyzed than desired.—Hartley Alexander.

United States Railroad Administration
CHRISTMAS HOLIDAY TRAVEL
NORFOLK SOUTHERN RAILROAD

Owing to the anticipated large volume of HOLIDAY TRAVEL the Public is earnestly requested to co-operate with the Railroads with a view of relieving as much as possible the congestion at Ticket Offices and on trains.

To that end Tickets should be purchased and Reservations made as far in advance of actual date of departure as possible.

On account of large volume of Parcel Post, Mail and Express matter, checkable baggage should be reduced to the minimum in order to prevent delays.-adv.

NOTICE OF ADMINISTRATION

Having qualified as Administrator of the late Willian H. Walton, I hereby give notice to all persons indebted to his estate to come forward and make immediate settlement, and those holding claims against the same to present them for payment within twelve months from the date of this notice, or it will be pleaded in bar of their recovery.

JOHN WALTON
Administrator
December 8th, 1919 D12-6t

STATE OF NORTH CAROLINA
Department of State

CERTIFICATE OF DISSOLUTION

To All to Whom These Presents May Come: — Greetings:

WHEREAS, It appears to my satisfaction, by duly authenticated record of the proceedings for the voluntary dissolution thereof by the unanimous consent of all the stockholders, deposited in my office, that the Fairfield and Elizabeth City Transportation Company, a corporation of this State, whose principal office is situated in the town of Fairfield, County of Hyde, State of North Carolina R. W. Jones beng the agent therein and in charge thereof, upon whom process may be served, has completed with the requirements of Chapter 21, Revisal of 1905, entitled "Corporations," preliminary to the issuing of this Certifcate of Dssolution:

NOW, THEREFORE, I J. Bryan Grimes; Secretary of State of the State of North aCrolina, do hereby certify that the said corporation did, on the 10th day of November 1919, file in my office a duly executed and attested consent in writing to the dissolution of said corporation, executed by all the stockholders thereof, which said consent and the record of the preceedings aforesaid are now on file in my said office as provided by law.

IN TESTIMONY WHEREOF, I have set my hand and affixed my official seal at Raleigh, this 10th day of November, A. D., 1919.

J. BRYAN GRIMES
Secretary of the State

cD5-4t

NOTICE OF ADMINISTRATION

Having qualified as Administrator of the late John Simpson I hereby, give notice to all persons indebted to his estate to come forward and make immediate settlement, and those holding claims agtinst the same to present them for payment within twelve months from the date of this notice, or it will be pleaded in bar of their recovery.

C. W. BROWN,
Administrator

cNovember 5th, 1919.-6t

NOTICE OF ADMINISTRATION

Having qualified as Administratrix of the late Isaiah Wheaton, I hereby give notice to all persons indebted to his estate to come forward and make immediate settlement, and those holding claims against the same to present them for payment within twelve months from the date of this notice, or it will be pleaded in bar of their recovery.

ROXANNA GRANDY,
Administratrix
ELS-N7-4t Clerk Superior Court
October 29, 1919. N7-4t